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ABSTRACT

Chinese has been classified as an "isolating" language which expresses grammatical relation with few or no bound inflectional forms and many fixed syntactic constructions. The basis for this notion chiefly originated from the nature of Chinese monosyllabic structures and the relation of syntactic to morphological phenomena. Mandarin Chinese, however, does have bound grammatical morphemes, but their presence is less evident in the writing system than in connected speech. Chinese often uses various types of affixation as an important tool in morphological processes. The retroflexed suffix -r, described in this paper, is a characteristic feature of Mandarin Chinese and is one of the most important affixational devices in Mandarin morphological processes. It serves to indicate a semantic change from the stem word and to change certain form classes into nominals, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Not only does it enrich the lexicon of the language, but it also colors connected speech more vividly. (Author/AMM)

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THE FUNCTION OF THE RETROFLEXED SUFFIX -r
IN THE MORPHOLOGICAL PROCESS OF MANDARIN CHINESE

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Languages vary greatly in the extent of their inflectional morphology. An old-fashioned classification of language used to regard Chinese as an "isolating" language which expresses grammatical relation with few or no bound inflectional forms and many fixed syntactic constructions. The basis for this notion chiefly originated from the nature of Chinese monosyllabic structures and the relation of syntactic to morphologic phenomena. Mandarin Chinese, however, does have bound grammatical morphemes, but their presence is less evident in the writing system than in connected speech. For instance, in the utterance like tāmen shuōzhao huàne 'They are talking', men, zhao, and ne are all the inflectional bound forms. The first one is used as a noun-plural bound morpheme; the latter two, progressive aspect¹. Thus, the Chinese language often uses various types of affixation as an important

¹The Chinese retroflexed suffix -r is originally derived from a free morpheme /ər/ (second tone) meaning "child". There are in Chinese a very small number of monosyllabic words which have the same segmental elements of /ər/ with a different tone, such as /ər/, with the second tone, in addition to the "child", also meaning "moreover"; with the third tone, it means "ear, near, you, or cookie"; fourth tone, "two". This retroflexed sound /ər/ can also be a grammatical suffix. When it does so, it often changes its nature into a nonsyllabic /-r/, being added to a great number of either monosyllabic or polysyllabic words, giving the "r-coloring" to the preceding syllables with the specific pronunciation depending on the phonological rules of its dialect. Since the discussion

tool in morphological processes. The retroflexed suffix -r is one of the most interesting of such features.

The retroflexed suffix -r commonly occurs in most Mandarin speaking areas. It is one of the morphological devices used in various different manners and to different degrees in individual Mandarin dialects, and it is much more widespread in the Peiping dialect than in any other Mandarin dialect. It generally serves as a nominal ending which adds a new meaning to that of its stem nominal. In the Peiping dialect, the retroflexed suffix -r tends to occur after any kind of nominal. A native speaker of the Peiping dialect may add a retroflexed suffix -r to nouns referring to any kind of concrete object and to a few abstract ideas. For instance, one can add a retroflexed suffix -r to words such as niǎo 'bird' ~ niǎor; huā 'flower' ~ huār; and also to such abstract words as bei 'generation' ~ beir; kōng 'empty, hollow' ~ kōngr. Thus, there are no infallible rules for determining which nominals may have such an ending in conversational speech. However, since this suffixal morpheme -r is originally derived from the free morpheme /ər/ (second tone), which means "child" or "smallness" and also has a sense of "cuteness", there is a general area of meaning of the phonological features is beyond the scope of this study, and for the sake of convenience, throughout this study, the author simply follows the Pinyin system transcribing this morpheme, as well as the examples themselves.

for it--that is, whenever the speaker wants to express some emotional fondness for things that are relatively small, the retroflexed suffix -r will be immediately added after the stem morpheme, as in xiao hair 'small child', xiao maor 'small cat', xiao chuángr 'small bed' (i. e., xiao 'small' + hai 'child' + -r, etc.)

It must be noted that the retroflexed suffix -r expresses more shades of meaning than just that of diminution. It has in some cases a more specific designation when added to the stem word. The following pairs of words will show the differences between them. The first one of each pair is the stem word; the second, the retroflexed suffix -r added.

1a. xin 'heart'

rénxin 'human heart'

b. xinr 'the central part of certain things'

càixinxr 'the central part of the vegetable'

dengxinr 'lamp wick'

2a. xin 'letter'

zhè shì nide xin. 'This is your letter'.

b. xinr 'news, message'

gěi tā dàige xinr. 'Bring the message to him'.

3a tou 'head'

réntou 'human head'

b. tour 'leader, top, or end'

tā shì wómende tour. 'He is our leader'.

qiángtourshang zhǎngle cǎo. 'On the top of the wall, there grows grass'.

zhege gushi méitour. 'This story has no end'.

The retroflexed suffix -r functioning as a nominal ending occurs not only after nouns, but also after other classes of words, changing the class of its stem words into a nominal form. There are two form classes, verbal and adjectival, to which the nominal suffix -r is commonly added in connected speech. Examples can be given as follows:

Stem word: verb

1. chī 'to eat'

wǒ méichī.

'I have not eaten'.

2. jiāng 'to tell, to explain' jiāngr 'meaning'

zhege zì méijiāng.

'This word is not explained'. 'This word is meaningless'.

3. gài 'to cover'

nǐ méiyǒu gài hǎo.

'You have not covered it well'.

Suffix added: nominal

chīr 'foods'

wǒ méichīr.

'I have no foods to eat'.

zhege zì méi jiāngr.

'This word is meaningless'.

gāir 'lid'

píngzì méiyǒu gāir.

'There is no lid on the bottle'.

Stem word: adjective

1. liàng 'bright'

zhèr bùliàng.

'It's not bright here'

2. jiān 'sharp'

zhe qīngbǐ hěn jiān.

Suffix added: nominal

liàngr 'light'

zhèr méiyǒu liàngr.

'There is no light here'.

jiānr 'point'

zhe qīngbǐ méiyǒu jiānr.

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'This pencil is very sharp'. 'This pencil has no point'.

3. yuan 'far'

nar hen yuan.

'It's very far there'.

yuanr 'long distance'

ni raole yuanr.

'You took a long way',

Not only does the retroflexed suffix -r serve as a noun ending and a pronoun ending as in zher 'here' and nar 'there', but it also function as a verbal, an adjectival and an adverbial suffix. When it does so, the stem word is often in a polysyllabic reduplicative constructions.² In addition, except for the verb, the adjective and adverb often have another structural suffix -de followed its suffix -r. The examples can be given as follows:

1. Verb:³

deng 'to wait' dengdengr

tang 'to lie down' tangtangr

xing 'to wake up' xingxingr

2. Adjective:

²There are certain stem-words can simply be added by the retroflexed suffix -r without a repetition of themselves. For instance: the verb wan 'to play' ~ wanr as a noncontrastive allomorph of wan; the adjective yidengdian 'a little' ~ yidengdianr; and the adverb yikuai 'together' ~ yikuair and so on.

³There is a noncontrastive variant of such verbs which is formed by inserting a morpheme yi between the reduplicative structure, as in,

dengyidengr tangyitangr xingyixingr

gāo 'high, lofty' gāogaorde

bò 'thin' bòborde

dàfāng 'generous, dignified' dàdafāngfangrde

lǎoshi 'sincere, honest' lǎolaoshishirde

3. Adverb:

hǎo 'good, well' hǎohaorde

màn 'slow' mànmanrde

qīng 'soft, not loud' qīngqingrde

In Chinese speech, there are two other words, namely zi 'child' or 'son' and tou 'head' which are also commonly used as nominal suffixes. Since zi also has etymologically a meaning of 'child', it often serves as an alternant of the suffix -r and function as a noncontrasting variant, as in

fār 'means, method' = fāzi

kōur 'button' = kouzi

fānguānr 'restaurant' = fānguánzi

However, since zi has no obligatory sense of diminution or of emotional fondness as the suffix -r usually does, the two are not completely interchangeable, for instance:

nǚr 'daughter' ≠ nǚzi 'woman, girl'

huār 'flower' ≠ huāzi 'flower seed, beggar'

In some cases, they are in complementary distribution, as in

Suffix -r:

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ci 'words, expression' ~ cir (*cizi)

xiaoshuo 'story, novel' ~ xiaoshuor (*xiaoshuozi)

Suffix -zi:

long 'deaf' ~ longzi 'a deaf person' (*longr)

ri 'sun, day' ~ rizi 'day, a date' (*rir)

The interchangeability of the suffixes -r and -zi after certain nominals is basically dialectal, but each case is dependent upon the speech habits of the community. In general, the native speakers of the Peiping dialect seem to have a preference for the suffix -r, whenever they feel such an ending is suitable for the nominal. whereas the Mandarin speakers of non-Peiping areas tend to use suffix -zi more. For instance, a Peiping speaker says, laotour 'old man', xiaohair 'small child', benr 'notebook, volume', xingr 'apricot'; the Mandarin speakers of non-Peiping dialects would say: laotouzi, xiaohaizi, benzi, and xinzi.

Interestingly enough, the retroflexed suffix -r can also occur, especially in the Peiping dialect, after any one of the two other suffixes -zi and -tou, forming two kinds of nominal suffix-cluster: -zir 'seed, a sense of small unit' and -tour with the meaning of 'leader, top, or end' when added to a noun-stem word, or with the meaning of 'it is worth...' when added to a verb-stem word. Following are some examples:

1. Suffix cluster -zir:

Stem word:

Suffix cluster -zir added:

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- a. tóng 'copper'
- b. guā 'melon'
- c. ji 'chicken'

2. Suffix cluster -tour:

A. Noun-stem word:

- a. pái 'sect, branch'
- b. níán 'year'
- c. shuǐ 'water'

B. Verb-stem word:

- a. mǎi 'to buy'
- b. kàn 'to see, to look at'
- c. chī 'to eat'

- tóngzir 'copper coins'
- guāzir 'dried melon seeds'
- jǐzir 'chicken egg'

Suffix cluster -tour added:

- páitour 'imposing behavior'
- níántour 'year, crop, harvest'

shuǐtour 'the water source'

Suffix cluster -tour added:

- mǎitour '[It is] worth buying'
- kántour '[It is] worth seeing or looking at'

chítour '[It is] worth eating'

In conclusion, the retroflexed suffix -r is a characteristic feature of Mandarin Chinese and is one of the most important affixational devices in Mandarin morphological processes. It serves, on the one hand, to indicate a semantic change from the stem word, and on the other hand, to change certain form classes into nominals, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. Not only does it enrich the lexicon of the language, but it also colors connected speech more vividly.

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